

'I just don't want to connect my life with this occupation': working-class young men, manual labour, and social mobility in contemporary Russia.

Abstract

A key strand in the Western literature on working-class masculinities focuses on whether young men are capable of the feminized performances apparently required of them in new service economies. However, the wider literature on processes of neoliberalization – emphasizing the 'hollowing out' of labour markets, the cultural devaluation of lower-skilled forms of employment, and the pathologisation of working-class lives – would suggest that it is as much a classed as a gendered transformation that is demanded of young men leaving school with few qualifications. This dimension of neoliberalization is highlighted by ethnographic data exploring the experiences and subjectivities of young workers in St. Petersburg, Russia, where traditional forms of manual labour have not given way to 'feminized' work, but have become materially and symbolically impoverished, and are perceived as incapable of supporting the wider transition into adult independence. In this context, young workers attempt to emulate new forms of 'successful masculinity' connected with novel service sector professions and the emergent higher education system, despite the unlikelihood of overcoming a range of structural and cultural barriers. These acquiescent, individualized responses indicate that, while ways of being a man are apparently being liberated from old constraints amongst the more privileged, neoliberalization narrows the range of subject positions available to working-class young men.

Keywords

Class, masculinities, labour, youth, neoliberalization, Russia

1. Introduction

In most Western industrialized countries transitions to adulthood amongst working-class young men have undergone significant changes in recent decades. During the

golden age of post-war affluence, the wide availability of skilled manual employment allowed young men to achieve the various markers of adult status relatively easily, offering them membership of a respectable form of working-class masculinity rooted in a strong work ethic and generations of labour politics (Willis 1977; Collinson 1992; Savage 2000). With the replacement of industrial sector jobs by unemployment and hyphenated forms of work in the new service sector, the material position of working-class young men has been transformed, with even those retaining a position in skilled manual labour finding themselves worse off than their fathers had been relative to the rest of the workforce (Roberts 2013a). Furthermore, through neoliberal discourses insisting upon a self-improvement agenda across life domains from employment and education to health, consumption and leisure, the construction of working-class young men as somehow unreflexive and incapable of change has subjected them to a form of symbolic impoverishment. For Hayward and Mac an Ghail (2014: 35), representations of white working-class men and masculinities have shifted from '[a] cultural valorisation... marked by authenticity, individuality, independence, autonomy and anti-repressive resistance... to [a] cultural pathologisation... marked by recidivism, abjectness and reactionary cultural politics'. Working-class young men are thus negotiating the transition to adulthood and the making of masculinity in radically different circumstances from those experienced by previous generations (Connell 2005).

The academic literature addressing young men's responses to this changing landscape has presented a range of portraits, many of which are at odds with the caricatured image of the backward job at the heart of policy and popular discourse (Francis 2006). Within the sphere of employment, for example, while several studies have pointed to the difficulties inevitably experienced by some young men in coming to terms with 'feminized' forms of employment in the new service sector (Bourgois 1995; Nixon 2009), others have shown young men adapting (Leidner 1991; McDowell 2000) or even embracing (Roberts 2013b) work traditionally regarded as feminine. Most notably,

Lloyd (1999) found that working-class young men were unconcerned by the gender profile of a given job as long as it paid well. Young men's flexibility in the face of change has been further evident in their experiences of and attitudes towards education. Reflecting its growing ubiquity, a number of studies (Archer and Yamashita 2003 and Burke 2011, for example) have indicated that, compared with previous generations, both young and older working-class men are much more likely to be involved in some form of further or higher education nowadays, 'either as escape, as a project for maximizing and fulfilling the self or a complicated mixture of the two' (Reay 2001: 336). While fulfilling neoliberalism's demands for self-invention, however, as Connell (2001: 8) argues, 'fluidity may be a great deal less fluid when examined in the institutional contexts of everyday life'; for working-class young men, neither feminized service sector employment nor much of the new education system has served as a reliable route out of marginality (Roberts 2013a).

The transformations in employment and education reshaping young men's transitions to adulthood are largely attributed to wider processes of neoliberalization, resulting from the globalisation of production and trade, the subjection of apparently all aspects of social and economic life to market forces, and, concomitantly, the promotion of sensibilities valorizing notions of self-authorship. However, as indicated by the references above, studies exploring these changes have focused almost exclusively on Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, US, and Australia. By contrast, this article seeks to take a broader view of neoliberalism, and thus to broaden our theorising about its effects, by exploring the changing shape of young men's transitions to adulthood in contemporary Russia, where the unravelling of the old school-to-factory transition has been somewhat different. Here, deindustrialization has not been experienced as a wholesale shift from the industrial to the service sector, but as a degradation of existing employment in industry, with economic adjustment taking place through the flexibility of workers' wages and hours and large numbers having no choice but to remain in

decaying enterprises on short-time and poverty wages (see Walker 2016). Thus, forms of manual labour traditionally associated with working-class masculinity continue to be widely available to young men in Russia, but remain low-paid compared with other sectors, and like entry-level service work in the West, their capacity to underpin wider transitions to adulthood is doubtful (Walker 2011). As well as echoing the material marginalization of working-class young men in the West, the Russian situation appears to mirror western transformations of class politics, as working-class communities and forms of employment are positioned at the bottom of the symbolic economy. In particular, in Russia as elsewhere in the post-socialist space, shifts towards self-governance and individualization underpin notions of working-class backwardness rooted in its apparent lack of entrepreneurialism and dependence on the old Soviet economy (Stenning 2005). Thus, while having access to forms of employment lost and even idealized in the west, transitions to adulthood and the making of masculinity amongst working-class young men in Russia are far from straightforward. Against this background, this article explores the narratives and experiences of young men training for a range of manual occupations in post-Soviet St. Petersburg, and the ways in which they are both shaped by and reflective of wider transformations of class and masculinity.

2. Reinscribing masculinities in post-Soviet Russia

As in many Western countries during the nineteen-eighties and nineties, late Soviet Russia saw the discursive construction of a 'crisis of masculinity' that was used to re-establish more traditional forms of gender relations and identities. Blaming the Soviet state for having masculinized women (by over-stating their public role) and feminized men (by depriving them of a genuine public role), the discourse re-positioned men, rather than the Soviet state-patriarch, as the rightful heads of households, as *perestroika* and the post-Soviet period opened up the new public spaces of business and politics for expressions of a 'natural' masculinity (Ashwin 2000). Thus, the ability to succeed in

these spaces has been central to a variety of iterations of hegemonic masculinity that have held cultural sway in Russia over the post-Soviet period, from the gangster stereotypes dominating the mid-1990s (Romanov 2002) to the moneyed civil servants and corporate men of the Putin era (Kon 2009). As well as placing a strong emphasis on men's material status, these constructions of masculinity have come to centre on a range of cultural and symbolic distinctions marking out 'successful men'. Chernova (2002), for example, outlines a new 'corporate standard' of hegemonic masculinity, in which emergent forms of consumption such as mobile technologies and high-end wristwatches signify men's control over information, time and social space. While such features are common to constructions of hegemonic masculinity in Western countries, contemporary versions of successful masculinity in Russia also valorise modernity, individuality, novelty and a cultural orientation towards the West, all of which reflect Russia's wider attempt to divorce itself from the Soviet past. Kon (2009), for example, describes how Russian men must now transform themselves from the coarse, proletarian 'bloke' (*muzhik*) of the Soviet period by swapping bad language for English, party membership cards for signet rings, and, 'most difficult of all, turning "we" into "I"' (2009: 174).

These transformations of masculinity are reflective of wider class transformations in Russia, which have echoed the shift towards neoliberal values of individual autonomy, choice and self-determination characteristic of many Western societies. As Makovicky (2014: 4) argues, in becoming marketplaces, a variety of arenas – housing, health, education, the workplace – have become sites for the enactment of the self as human capital, such that 'all over post-socialist Eurasia the "duty to choose" and the "duty to consume" are now part of the performance of citizenship'. In this context, the working classes are easily positioned as somehow lacking and abject, dependent on and unable to extract themselves from the backward, first modernity economy and spaces of the Soviet past. The depiction of working-class men, not only in Russia, but also in other parts of post-socialist Eastern Europe, best illustrates this shift. As Kideckel (2008)

argues in relation to Romania, for example, the symbolic position of miners and industrial workers has shifted 'from veneration to denigration', such that 'workers either disappear from national media altogether, or appear only as unrecognisable caricatures' (2008: 30). In their Russian variant, such caricatures have emerged on 'hate websites' delighting in the portrayal of working-class young men as *gopniki* – a pejorative term echoing the Anglo-Saxon 'chav' and 'redneck' (Stenning 2005), which constructs working-class youth as a backward, illiterate mass inhabiting outlying districts of provincial towns (Walker 2011).

The denigration of working-class men in Russia is in stark contrast to the position of relative dominance they had occupied within the Soviet hierarchy of prestige, when the state had attempted to derive legitimacy through its association with ordinary workers (Kotkin 1994). This public recognition was echoed in the workplace, as skilled manual labourers often possessed significant agency within the production process. Given the poor quality of materials and unreliable machinery, enterprise managers were heavily dependent on workers' highly specific skill sets to meet planning targets, and in turn, workers themselves were suspicious of 'specialists' who lacked their experience and know-how (Alashev 1995). The shortcomings of Soviet production also gave the labour process an artisanal quality, requiring initiative and a make-do-and-mend approach that workers were able to extend to their various domestic projects (ibid). Against the emerging class politics of the post-Soviet period, studies of the lived experiences of workers in contemporary Russia have presented a similar picture of pragmatism, initiative and self-help, with working men in a range of occupations embedding themselves in homosocial activities both at work and in their leisure time, and taking pride in manual skills and resourcefulness (Abramov 2010; Morris 2016). Nevertheless, such portraits have focused on the experiences of older men, including those who had grown up during the Soviet period. In addition to ethnographic studies, the experiences of working-class men are highlighted by the demographic and health literatures, which

identify working-class, working-age men as the primary sufferers of psycho-social stress and alcoholism during the health and mortality crises of the 1990s (Bessudnov et al. 2011).

Against this background, this article explores the making of masculinity amongst working-class young men in contemporary Russia. Drawing upon qualitative research with students and graduates of vocational training colleges in St. Petersburg, it argues that wider transformations of class and gender are reflected in young men's ambivalence towards, and attempts to navigate their way out of, blue-collar careers. While the biographical narratives of the young men are characterized by many of the codes of an archetypal blue-collar masculinity, in discussions about the future, manual labour itself is overlooked by many in favour of prospective careers in attractive areas of the new service sector. These aspirations, as well as related plans to acquire higher education, run counter to both popular and academic representations of working-class young men, in Russia as in western countries, as disinclined towards the forms of 'self-invention' demanded by neoliberal labour markets. However, despite the young men's attempts to carve out new pathways, they continue to be positioned by their class background, which both shapes the resources available to them and is reproduced by the institutions defining their transitions to adulthood. The article thus provides further evidence for the pseudo-transformative nature of employment and educational changes taking place in neoliberal contexts, which increasingly demand forms of social mobility that are impossible to achieve (Walkerdine 2003). At the same time, it highlights the pervasiveness of these changes in undermining any claims to hegemony traditionally made by subordinated groups of young men (Coles 2009).

Methods and data

The article is based on a case study conducted in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region in 2008 as part of an ongoing programme of research exploring the changing

nature of growing up working-class in post-Soviet Russia. An earlier case study investigated the experiences of young people in the provincial city of Ul'yanovsk, a mature but declining industrial region in which employment in low-paid manufacturing work predominated (Author 2011). St. Petersburg was chosen for a second case study because, as a rapidly developing metropolis, it provided an opportunity to examine how young people's lives were being shaped in a context of economic growth and expansion. In the period just before the global recession beginning in 2008, St. Petersburg had unemployment levels significantly lower than the Russian average (2 per cent against 6.3 per cent nationally) and a fast-expanding service economy (Goskomstat 2011). In addition to the city of St. Petersburg, Pushkino, a small town situated in the city's hinterland, was included to compare the experiences of young men in a more spatially limited context and to gauge the impact of place on their experiences and aspirations. The research was conducted in a range of colleges within Russia's initial vocational education and training (IVET) system, which was established during the early Soviet period to train young people for a range of manual professions in agriculture and manufacturing. While their working-class profile has historically given IVET colleges a low reputation (Matthews 1982), a number of those in the study had made attempts to reinvent themselves in recent years, upgrading their institutional status from *profuchilishche* or *litsei* to the more prestigious *kolledzh*, and developing links with higher education institutions. Despite these innovations, however, the subjects they offered to young men were the same range of manual trades that have historically been constructed as 'men's professions' (welder and lathe operator, for example), while trades connected to the new service economy (hospitality, tourism) were offered to young women (see Walker 2015). Three of the colleges had strong employer links – the Railway College, which was connected to Russian Railways; *Profuchilishche* 98, which worked with the city's electricity provider Elektrosvyaz; and the Kirovskii College, associated with a major tractor and machine parts manufacturer – and provided

training tailored to those partners. The remaining colleges – Petropavlovskii Technical College and *Profuchilishche* 8 in Pushkino – provided training for professions in general demand such as car mechanic, welder and other construction trades.¹

In total, semi-structured, biographical interviews were taken with 31 young men aged 18–25 who were either studying in or had graduated from one of the five colleges. The young men were recruited through their teachers, and in terms of social background, were largely typical of the IVET sector, with one or both parents employed in manual labour of some kind. The age range of the respondents was chosen to allow a focus on a particular school-to-work transition, incorporating their experiences of joining IVET colleges and of navigating the labour and education markets before and after graduation, but interviews also explored future plans in relation to housing and family transitions, which would take place later in their twenties and thirties (see Walker 2011). Single interviews were carried out in empty classrooms and offices in respondents' colleges and workplaces, and were supplemented by additional ethnographic material such as everyday observations in and around these sites.

'Learning to labour': transitions into manual work

Approaching graduation from IVET colleges, none of the respondents expected to have any difficulty finding a job, and many appeared to be following largely unproblematic transitions into the manual professions for which they had trained, in such a way that the aims of the IVET system and of the young men themselves coincided. As well as stemming from the institutional logic of the system, these transitions grew out of the young men's social, cultural, and bodily capital, and reflected a configuration of an archetypal blue-collar masculinity that contained a number of familiar classed and gendered codes. As such, both in Pushkino and in St. Petersburg, the jobs available to the young men upon graduating IVET colleges were congruent with their immediate expectations, providing outlets for classed and gendered performances that felt 'natural'

for them. In Pushkino, for example, all of the respondents were either undergoing practical placements or had already begun jobs in areas related to their training as car mechanics, and described orientations towards manual work in naturalistic terms, as having grown out of long-standing personal interests:

I: ... so why did you choose specifically this profession then, car mechanic?

R: Because I'm drawn to it, and because I like it. I live it, it's *my* work. That's it. I just needed to strengthen my knowledge with some sort of formal education.

I: So you're into fixing up cars and that?

R: Yeh yeh, it's my hobby (Misha)

It's just closer to me. Like, I've got a motorbike at the dacha... I tinker about with it. So I decided to come here. (Artem)

Indeed, given that the fixing of cars is a common source of secondary income for many men (Morris 2016), and that the cars they would own in the future were likely to need constant attention, respondents described their skills as car mechanics as something that would always 'come in handy' (*vsegda prigoditsya*), even if they were not used for formal employment. This valorising of manual skills both for formal and informal uses was also central to the ways in which some respondents thought about compulsory military service, which, as will be explored below, is a specifically working-class transition in Russia, despite universal conscription:

If they call me up, I'll serve. I'm positive about it... I think it'll help me... I can work out, start weight training and all that. And I'll get an army profession, new skills... It's alright (Dmitri)

You could come back from the army and think, I can use a weapon, why not work as a security guard, the easiest way to make money... or some do debt collecting (Andrey)

Pushkino respondents also indicated the importance of social capital in the acquisition of practical skills and informal knowledges about how to earn money, as well as in securing training placements and actual jobs, with a number of older men – fathers, other male members of social networks, and their college tutors – involved in these:

I'll work at ours, lorry driving, delivering building materials... my dad's mate... he's got two lorries, so he works on one, and the other one's just sitting there... (Mitya)

Similar narratives and experiences emerged amongst respondents in St. Petersburg itself, where many had already built up a good deal of work experience across a range of casual labouring jobs (*khaltury*), sometimes from a very young age. Again, social capital was key in shaping access to such work or, in the case of Mitya, whose father was a warehouse loader, understanding where to find it:

I've been working since I was 14... First as a loader at the market, for a year.. then at a warehouse, also as a loader... at a beer warehouse.... I just went up and asked. Well, I found out that these warehouses existed, then just asked the managers (Maksim)

Casual jobs, through people I know. We'll turn up and do decorating work... It varies, but mainly, it's like, there's a site, and you'll do say ten days, and get, I dunno, thirty thousand probably. It's alright (Roman)

This early entry into the workforce reflected the importance the young men attached to achieving a degree of financial independence from parents, not least to fund fledgling consumer lifestyles and expensive items such as cars. In turn, the spending prowess the young men derived from their labour underpinned an apparently confident masculinity,

displayed, for example, in the ridiculing of the small stipends they received on training placements:

You get tired of being dependent on your parents. You need to earn your own money... You need to earn, say, 20 000 roubles a month.

On placement, for one day they give you 150 to 200 roubles. Well what sort of money is that? ... for eight hours! It's like, well, that's not money! (Mitya)

Most of the respondents, then, had experienced a number of forms of manual employment – either paid or as a trainee – by graduation, such that transitions into full-time work were experienced as a continuation of a longer socialization into manual labour. Like their counterparts in Pushkino, many of the young men in the city were planning transitions into jobs demanding the trades they had acquired, either through college partners or their practical training placement. Others were moving into more novel forms of employment in the new service sector, which, while not requiring the skills they had developed at their colleges, nevertheless demanded similar forms of gendered performance from the young men. Jobs such as retail distributor (*merchandaizer*), for example, emphasized their energy and mobility rather than technical skills:

I'll probably work as a retail distributor... you basically have to drive around and deliver products... If you've got a car, it's not difficult to get a job like that, and they [employers] want young men. Because they're young, they're energetic, and they've got cars, so they're busy toing and froing and they get everything done. (Mitya)

Thus, on graduating from IVET colleges young men in both Pushkino and St. Petersburg were making relatively straightforward transitions into a variety of forms of manual and service sector employment, all of which were congruent with typical forms of masculine performance. Indeed, at the level of performativity, the jobs available had all the characteristics of the forms of employment that have apparently been lost in Western contexts (McDowell 2000, Nixon 2009), and none of them demanded from the young men attributes that they did not have, or

performances they could not give. Manufacturing and other labouring jobs were outlets for traditional codes of working-class masculinity valorising the acquisition and application of manual skill, while transitions into newer forms of employment were equally tied up with the forms of social, cultural and bodily capital available to the young men. Crucially, through such employment, these forms of capital had immediate currency – they ‘worked’ – allowing the young men to begin to establish independent lifestyles.

Colonizing the future: white-collar masculinities

While there appeared to be a naturalized ‘fit’ between the young men’s performances of masculinity and the jobs they were entering on leaving IVET colleges, and despite the value such jobs held for young men in their late teens and early twenties, there was widespread ambivalence about the prospects such career routes offered in the longer term. With the exception of respondents in Pushkino, whose ‘horizons for action’ (Hodkinson et al. 2012) appeared firmly fixed at the local level, most respondents regarded the forms of work they were entering only as jobs ‘for now’ (*pervoe vremya*), and did not intend to remain in them any longer than was necessary. This ambivalence was rooted first and foremost in the perception that jobs in manual labour would not offer sufficient career growth for the young men to be able to achieve wider life-stage transitions in housing and family. Sasha, for example, describes the prospect of repaying a mortgage with the salary he stood to earn on the St Petersburg metro:

Basically, you get your wages and hand it all over, get paid, hand it over, get paid, hand it over... And renting, well on average, if you live with your family, in a two-roomed apartment, it’s about 25-30,000 a month (625-750EUR)...

That’s also, basically, all of your wages. (Sasha)

Importantly, it was not only starting salaries that respondents were concerned by, but the progression structures operating in the sectors they were entering, which were perceived as severely limited:

In factories it's like... the wages are really low, like, ten thousand, twelve, and there's no prospect of career growth. It's like, say you started there, stood by a machine, well that's it. You'll be standing next to that machine basically for the rest of your life... It's pointless... yes, you get pay rises, but say you were, like, an ordinary foreman, right? And you became a senior foreman. Well, they'd add a thousand, maybe two. Really, it's pointless.

(Volodya)

Interviews with college staff echoed these perceptions. According to the Director of the Kirovskii college, retaining young workers at their factory partner was enormously difficult, with only approximately twenty per cent of their graduates remaining there after six months.

As these narratives suggest, the young men's concerns about their future prospects at such workplaces were tied up with expectations that they would at some stage fulfil the role of 'provider' (*kormilets*), not only for a new family, but also, for their parents in old age. Some stated this explicitly, and as the following respondent indicates, the image of the factory worker was simply incompatible with notions of success:

[On entering college] I was more, I wanted to go into metal work. But now I've finished training, it's like, I suppose I've changed my mind, I don't know... I'd like to be a director (*nachalnik*). I'd like to be, you know, not just an ordinary worker, but a director. Because... I'd like for my parents not to want for anything in their old age, and I want a family of course, and to earn some money. (Valery)

It's like, I'd like to buy a flat, to earn a good wage, be a director... not be subordinate to the bosses. (Roman)

As such, respondents' narratives about their ability to fulfil the provider role drew upon wider discursive constructions of successful masculinity, which was posited most often as a 'director'. In

some cases, aspirations such as these could sit alongside plans of being an 'ordinary worker' in the first instance and then working one's way up:

I want career growth, yeh, like, although at the moment I'm just a qualified worker, further on I intend to become a foreman. And then, after a number of years, maybe I'll become a director, possibly, if, of course, things work out.

(Rinat)

In other cases, however, notions of successful masculinity depended on the negation of a blue-collar identity. For some, directors personified a kind of effortless achievement of success, which was contrasted against the haplessness of the ordinary worker, 'running around' but never getting anywhere:

If you're a director, you'll be sitting there in an office, giving everyone orders, not doing anything... if not, you're not in an office, you're running around somewhere, making something, fixing something... I'm not staying with something in this life that doesn't bring me any sort of career growth, so that at the end of my life I'll just be an ordinary worker, I don't really want that. (Vlad)

Like, you know... the Russian workhorse (*trudyaga*), who works tirelessly, doing heavy labour to earn a crust... I'll be in charge of people like that.

(Egor)

Such narratives thus went beyond the material shortcomings of manual labour, negating the claims to agency made in blue-collar valorisations of manual skill and notions of autonomy at work (Morris 2016), and recognizing the symbolic impoverishment of the backward worker incapable of realising himself beyond his physical labour. This recognition was further evident, albeit less explicitly, in the popularity of professional roles other than 'director', such as the nebulous title of 'manager', as well as representatives of newer areas of the economy such as advertising and

marketing. These areas not only appeared to promise greater career growth and material wealth, but also carried connotations of novelty and modernity – not least because of their linguistic connection to the West (*markyeting, menedzhment*) – and thus held significant symbolic capital. Against such attractive options, respondents had difficulty ‘connecting with’ their manual trades:

R: Yeh, I wanted to go into metal work, kind of, but now, I don't know. Now of course I'm thinking, to go, to go and study somewhere, probably do advertising.

I: Do you regret choosing this profession?

R: Well, maybe it'll come in handy but... I just don't want to connect my life with this occupation... (Mikhail)

Thus, while constructing transitions into IVET colleges through narratives valorising manual skill, it was the image of the office-based, rational, white-collar worker that many respondents drew upon in trying to imagine the future, in which the material and symbolic capital denied to the factory worker would be available to them. In this way, although the forms of manual labour the young men were involved in did not require the types of ‘masculinising’ identity work found amongst young men in female-dominated occupations in the West (Leidner 1991; McDowell 2000), they were nevertheless reconstituted temporally, as only ‘for now’. Correspondingly, as Archer and Yamashita (2003) find in their study of ‘street’ masculinities in the UK, the respondents did not occupy a singular subject position, but shifted between different identity discourses in relation to different aspects of their lives, one of which allowed them to occupy the present, and the other, to colonize the future.

Realising social mobility

As already noted, the young men had little faith in the progression structures operating within the major industrial enterprises connected to their colleges, which were essentially the old Soviet reward systems providing incremental pay rises for experience (*opyt/stazh*) and skill level (*razryad*). Instead, even those intending to ‘work their way up’ were planning to do so through the

acquisition of higher education, which they saw as providing a fast-track to career growth (*kar'iernii rost*), either to positions of influence within industry, or out of manual professions altogether. As such, higher education played a crucial role in the young men's narratives of successful masculinity:

I've got a friend who works at... the Ford factory... he started as an ordinary assembler, you know, putting parts together. And now – he's manager of a production line... so he's had career growth... And he's got higher education. And those people who don't have higher education, they're also working... but they're just screwing nuts on and that's it... so, higher education gives you the chance of career growth. (Igor)

In addition to the various links established between IVET colleges and HEIs, the wider market of higher education in St. Petersburg was well developed, reflecting its transformation from a relatively exclusive pathway to an easily accessible (in terms both of price and entrance) mass market of educational services (UNDP 2004). Given this ubiquity, none of the respondents wishing to pursue higher education saw any problems acquiring a place to do so. As regards courses, while some were considering engineering qualifications that would build on their vocational training, more often they were favouring what they referred to as 'humanities' (*gumanitarnie*) courses such as management, marketing and law.

I'd like, for example, like, if I want to go to a university, then something in humanities, some sort of manager, service sector manager maybe, something connected with that. (Sasha)

Indeed, such was the hold of this type of subject on the young men's imaginations that even those training for *Elektrosvyaz*, who would receive funded places to continue training in electrical engineering, were reported by the company's deputy director as having asked for courses in management to be paid for instead (a request flatly declined). The popularity of 'humanities' subjects, and the imagined futures connected to them, was well known to staff in the colleges, and

underpinned a perception that the young men were looking for quick fixes:

The trouble with young people nowadays is that they want everything at once, they want to be a manager, to have a high salary, whereas what we give them is just a start... (Assistant Director, PU98)

However, this perception, echoing the popular discourse that young people in Russia have 'lost the value of labour' (Riordan et al. 1996), misrecognised the young men's intentions and motivations, accusing them as it did of being somehow maladjusted to wider social norms. In fact, the young men rightly understood that the pathways to adult masculinity they were being offered were not in keeping with wider societal perceptions of success, and their strategies to overcome this were entirely in keeping with the project of neoliberalism, which requires subjects to work on their skills, competencies and networks in order to succeed (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Indeed, the young men's attempts to achieve social mobility ran counter not only to the notion of an idle youth, but also, to discourses of working-class 'dependency', rooted in an apparent inability to adapt to new circumstances. Here, the young men's responses illustrated their adaptability and pragmatism in the face of change, as they prioritised flexible working arrangements to accommodate their study plans. While some were able to do this in the manufacturing sector, for others it was the *inflexibility* of factory jobs, with their rigid working hours impinging on invaluable study-time, which made them unattractive:

I probably won't go to work at the factory, because you've got to spend too much time [there]... they work three days on, three days off, so you'd just be working, and there'd be less time for study. And I don't want to, you know, come back from work exhausted; I want to still have some strength for studying, for all the coursework... (Valery)

The young men's flexibility and pragmatism was further evident in their orientations towards learning. While recalling experiences of compulsory schooling as a period of disengagement when, in keeping with the blue-collar narratives outlined above, they abandoned the academic track for

something more technical, many described studying in IVET colleges as a transformative experience in which they 'grew up' and recognized the importance of education:

R: Well, I was a bad student at school. But then I came here, and here, I kind of switched my brain on. Simple really. And moving forward, I want to get higher education.

I: So you were a better student here then?

R: Much better. (Seryozha)

While higher education was thus central to many of the respondents' future plans, however, they faced a number of disadvantages in seeing these through. First, despite the fact that a number of the colleges had established preferential links with HEIs offering their students guaranteed entry, all respondents faced military conscription except for a few exempted on health grounds. While young men taking the academic track leave school at seventeen and have already joined universities by the conscription age of eighteen, students in the IVET system graduate later, and are far more likely to be enlisted. College directors thus described IVET colleges as 'feeding' the army, which is widely regarded as consisting of 'workers and peasants', despite ostensibly universal conscription. Plans for further study, then, depended on the young men maintaining their commitment beyond military service; something that, for both cultural and educational reasons, would not be easy:

After the army you've just forgotten everything... like, it'd just be really difficult... and, I think, the desire to study would have gone already, you'd need to work already. (Vanya)

Yeh it'd be much harder after [military service]... you'd forget everything. I mean, I'm not going to be sitting there with exercise books and textbooks am I! (Misha)

Indeed, Cherednichenko (2004: 401) finds in longitudinal research that IVET graduates are the

least likely educational group to have realized plans to continue their education three years later, pointing to army service as a critical factor. Thus, in contrast to Pushkino respondents, some of whom saw the army as a 'way out', most in the city wanted to avoid military service, one respondent eloquently describing it as a 'senseless waste of time' (Maks).

Alongside the structural barrier presented by conscription, it was clear that the respondents generally lacked the various cultural, material and social resources they would need to realize their aspirations. Plans for study after the army, for example, were invariably to study part-time whilst working rather than as a full-time student. Plans of where to study were undeveloped, leaving the young men vulnerable to the many new HEIs that are, according to UNDP (2004: 73), 'simply pandering to demand from a very undiscerning group of consumers'. Finally, although possessing the social capital to access a wide range of manual jobs, none of the respondents spoke of having contacts able to help them into the sorts of careers they were envisaging – contacts that would invariably be required in a labour market in which informal relations play a dominant role (Gerber and Mayorova, 2010). Perhaps cognisant of these disadvantages, some of the young men expressed regret about the 'wrong choices' they had made earlier:

They asked me if I wanted to stay [at school], but I wanted a change... At the time I didn't even really think about it... [But] if I think about it now, it's like, I was just too lazy to study... If I'd had these thoughts in my head then, I'd have finished school. (Mikhail)

Such forms of regret and self-blame – markers of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) call the individualization of social inequality – reflected at once the ambivalence the young men felt about their long-term prospects and the enormous difficulties of re-inventing themselves as someone else.

Conclusion

Studies of working-class masculinities in Western contexts have tended to focus on the gendering

of service sector work as feminine, and the ways in which working-class young men have reconstituted or, sometimes, rejected this. In the present study, the performance of gender-appropriate roles was not an issue – neither the blue-collar nor the new service sector work available to the young men had any connotations of femininity. Rather, as Lloyd (1999) also finds, of much greater significance in the young men's orientations towards employment was the ability of their jobs and prospective careers to underpin wider transitions to adulthood. Given the centrality of the role of provider to constructions of masculinity in Russia, the perceived inability of accessible forms of employment to do this meant that manual labour itself, while not feminised, was emasculated. Thus, while manual labour was an important resource in the making of masculinity in the present – underpinning consumption and educational strategies, providing independence from parents – it was a dead end in the young men's imaginings of the future, as what had been 'jobs for life' in the Soviet period came to be seen in the same way as entry-level service work in the West (Nickson 2009). Despite their obvious affinity with the tasks and skills involved in the jobs they were training for, that which had 'felt natural' was now treated pragmatically, as something to be grown out of. In this way, as Archer and Yamashita (2003) also find in their study of 'street' masculinities in the UK, the respondents did not occupy a singular subject position, but shifted between different identity discourses in relation to different aspects of their lives, reflecting their recognition of the need for self-transformation. This temporal identity work, much like the reconstitution of feminised employment as masculine, allowed the young men to occupy positions they themselves recognised as stigmatised.

Despite a range of cultural and historical differences, then, it is this need to 'work on the self' that unites the experiences of working-class young men in the Russian and Western contexts. While archetypal constructions of working-class masculinity have traditionally rested on notions of independence, autonomy, solidarity, skill, courage, opposition, mastery, and dignity, these class-cultural resources have been severely eroded. As Savage (2000) argues in relation to the UK, alongside the replacement of manufacturing with service sector employment, this has resulted from the cultural ascendancy of the neoliberal value of self-authorship, which has universalised

the notion of career as an individual project, and in doing so, revalorised white-collar workers with values previously ascribed to their blue-collar counterparts. In Russia, this reversal sees its clearest expression in the narratives of working-class young men, who contrast the agency and control possessed by 'directors' and other white-collar professionals with the apparent haplessness of the embodied, 'simple worker'. In doing so, the young men suggest a kind of hardening, or narrowing, of the subject positions available to them. This is in contrast to current discussions about a 'softening' and 'broadening' of forms of masculinity in the West, where young men are deemed to be shunning traditionally 'laddish' attitudes towards young women, homosexuals, and even employment (Anderson 2009). In focusing on the diverse forms of tolerance and equality apparently created by cultural liberalism, such discussions have tended to ignore the homogenising, exclusionary processes that are a parallel component of neoliberalism.

The present study also casts doubt on the notion, developed by Coles (2009), that subordinate masculinities may themselves have claims to hegemony. Taking issue with Connell's (2005) argument that hegemonic masculinity by necessity subordinates other forms of masculinity, Coles argues that hegemonic masculinity may have a marginal impact on men who 'disassociate themselves from the mainstream and operate in social milieus where their masculinity is dominant in relation to other men' (Coles 2009: 30-31). While there are countless historic examples of masculine subcultures subverting dominant notions of success, the counter-school culture of Willis's (1977) 'lads' being the most often cited, locating alternative forms of recognition and valorisation appears increasingly difficult under conditions of neoliberalism. This is especially true in relation to the educational and labour market opportunities available to young men, and indeed to young women, in many industrialised countries. The combination of poor job opportunities offering little status or material reward with an increasingly ubiquitous higher education system promising glittering careers has made social mobility not simply an aspiration, but a necessity, without which individuals are positioned as immobile, incomplete (Walkerdine 2003). While neoliberalism's demands for self-invention are very real, however, its promises of transformation are largely a fantasy, with young people in countries such as the UK facing

historically low levels of social mobility (Brown 2013). For the young men in the present study, realizing new aspirations was no more likely – given similarly low levels of social mobility in Russia (Bessudnov 2014), in all probability, these working-class young men would get working-class jobs. What has changed is that those jobs, like the service work entered into by young men in the West (Roberts 2013b), carry neither the prestige nor the material rewards of the forms of employment previously available to working-class youth, regardless of the gendered performances they involve.

Notes

1. The names of colleges, employers and respondents have been altered to protect respondents' identities.

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